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Romania's Arab Students: A Growing Problem for the Regime

The growing political activism of Middle Eastern students attending Romanian universities is complicating President Ceausescu's efforts to maintain good relations with all the countries and political movements in the Middle East. Intra-Arab student rivalries have already resulted in several violent incidents in recent months and we believe the situation is ripe for additional flare-ups. Ceausescu's efforts to promote a negotiated settlement in the Middle East, his open support for PLO Chief Yasir Arafat, and Romania's ties to Israel could even make the Romanians themselves a target for supporters of the radical Arab states and their client Palestinian groups. Terrorists could also use the student network to carry out attacks against US or other western targets.

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Foreign Students

Bucharest actively promotes a large-scale educational program for foreign university students, mostly from Africa and the Middle East, as part of its effort to expand relations with the Third World and to bolster its maverick foreign policy. The foreign students--especially the wealthy Arabs--also provide badly needed foreign exchange; since 1979, students not on scholarship must pay their tuition in hard currency. According to official statistics, in 1982 there were approximately 20,000 foreign students in Romania. Data by nationality are not available, but Jordanian diplomats estimate the number of Palestinian students alone at 6,000. []

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The students have long caused security problems for the regime. According to the US Embassy, they frequently develop hostile attitudes toward Romanian officials and periodically have engaged in clashes with the local militia. In most cases, the disruptions have stemmed from complaints about poor living conditions, the restrictive and alien environment, and the low quality of education. There is also friction with the local populace, which views the students as lacking respect for Romanian customs. Moreover, the Arabs in particular tend to engage in conspicuous consumption, frequently using funds gained through black market activities. []

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Rising Political Activism and Violence

The increased hostility among Arab countries and within Palestinian organizations over PLO and Jordanian peace initiatives has prompted stepped-up political activity and violence among the various Arab student factions in Romania. The most serious incident to date was the assassination in Bucharest last December of a Jordanian diplomat by a radical Palestinian student. []

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[] We believe the perpetrator was the Abu Nidal terrorist group, formerly known as the Black June organization, which operates out of Syria. Its members have repeatedly attacked Jordanian targets elsewhere and threatened further violence since King Hussein agreed last November to allow PLO leader Arafat to chair a meeting of the Palestine National Council in Amman. []

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"Kid Glove" Security Response

Since the December assassination, the Romanians have been bracing for further trouble.

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When, for example, the Ministry of Interior learns of troublesome student activities, it generally applies pressure through the Ministry of Education rather than using the security forces. In some instances the ring leader is quietly expelled from Romania. In any event, however, before taking any action the local security officials await guidance from Bucharest. Only on rare occasions--when very alarmed by the volatility of the situation--does the regime resort to force.

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Diplomatic Complications

Ceausescu's desire to be an "honest broker" trying to facilitate peace in the Middle East has given him headaches in trying to maintain good relations with all the squabbling parties. To date he has been fairly successful but he is facing increasing difficulty from all sides.

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Ceausescu's activities earlier this year no doubt attracted much criticism from radical Arabs in Romania and abroad. In February, he had highly publicized meetings in Bucharest with Arafat, Israeli Prime Minister Peres, and a special envoy of Egyptian President Mubarak, and he also endorsed the PLO-Jordanian accord of 11 February between Arafat and King Hussein. During a meeting with Ceausescu in Tripoli in March, Libyan leader Qadhafi rejected the Amman agreement as a surrender to Israel, reproached Romania for its relations with Israel, and warned that these policies would have "consequences" for Romania's relations with Arab countries. The threat might presage restrictions on Libyan oil deliveries, but Qadhafi probably hopes his public displeasure alone will bring about a more favorable Romanian attitude. Beyond possible economic reprisals, Ceausescu no doubt fears that Libyan students in Romania will carry out terrorist violence.

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Ceausescu is also experiencing pressure from Arab moderates. Jordanian Foreign Minister Al Masri, during a visit to Bucharest in April, expressed anger over Ceausescu's refusal to extradite the assassin of the Jordanian diplomat or to allow a Jordanian security team to conduct an interrogation. Even personal appeals from King Hussein did not persuade Ceausescu to cooperate. Consequently all other bilateral issues--including the King's accepting a long-standing invitation to visit Romania--are on hold. While anxious for close ties with Amman, Bucharest no doubt fears that cooperation on the assassination investigation will jeopardize Romania's ties with radical Arabs--Syria and Libya--especially if they are implicated in the murder. The Romanians also may be concerned that the prisoner might reveal embarrassing information about their cooperation with various Palestinian groups and that the extradition of the assassin might touch off violence from radical Palestinian students in Romania. To avoid taking sides, the Romanians probably will stage-manage a low profile trial that will portray the assassin as mentally unstable and acting independently.

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Outlook

Romania is unlikely to become a large-scale terrorist battleground because of its generally tight police controls, but the potential for occasional incidents of violence has increased.

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We think there is also a risk that Ceausescu's role in Middle Eastern politics will sooner or later lead radical Arab

students, for the first time, to attack Romanian targets. Ceausescu initiatives to promote a negotiated Middle East settlement or the conviction and sentencing of the assassin of the Jordanian diplomat might be the catalyst. Ceausescu has privately assured the Jordanian Foreign Minister, according to the US Embassy that the outcome of the trial would be "satisfactory--execution or up to 30 years in prison." ☐

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Finally, we believe terrorists could use the student network to attack US or other western targets in Romania. Last March, Lebanese students told Lebanese diplomats that there were "Islamic Jihad" terrorists in Bucharest and they were planning attacks against Americans. Six students had reportedly attended a planning meeting in the Iranian Embassy. ☐

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Ceausescu almost certainly recognizes that his Middle East balancing act is becoming more precarious and probably feels particularly vulnerable because the security apparatus cannot ensure complete control of the Arab students. As a result, we think Ceausescu, while not abandoning his even-handed stand, will be cautious in pursuing activities that would anger Libya or Syria. And we believe he may seek a modus vivendi with potential sponsors of terrorist violence in an effort to gain some protection. To appease the more radical groups, for example, Romania could provide at least some indirect support--training, safehaven, and medical care. Despite such tactics, the probability that Bucharest will experience more violence will remain high so long as there is a large concentration of Arab students throughout the country. ☐

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